

MBC – 6/28/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“He Will Purify the Sons of Levi”
 Malachi 2:17-3:6

We’ve been studying the last of the Minor Prophets – Malachi. About 50,000 Jews returned to Israel after the Babylonian Captivity. They rebuilt the Temple that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed under Zerubbabel, and they rebuilt the walls of the city under Nehemiah. But it wasn’t the same: the temple was smaller and nothing compared to Solomon’s Temple. And God’s glory hadn’t returned to this Temple.

And Israel was struggling economically and spiritually. But instead of seeking God through repentance, they just complained about the way God was treating them. Let’s read—

- Malachi 2:17–3:6 ¹⁷You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?” ¹“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. ⁵“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. ⁶“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

I. The skeptical question: “Where is justice?”

God’s people have a long history of complaining. And that’s what they were doing here: They’re questioning *God* about *His* ways, instead of examining their own hearts; and He’s tired of it—

- Malachi 2:17 ¹⁷You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, [and this is sarcastic:] “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

What are they saying? “God, the wicked seem to be doing great, while us good people continue to suffer. What’s up with that? Why don’t You do what You used to do in the good old days and judge some sinners? And bless us. C’mon, You’re the God of the 10 plagues – where is justice?” They had forgotten what David said in Ps.37—

- Psalm 37:1–2 ¹Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! ²For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.

God’s justice is always certain, but it’s not always on our timetable. And how ironic of them to question God about judging sin, when they were the ones breaking His covenant: divorcing their wives and marrying pagan women – offering lame, superficial worship. And now they complain that God isn’t punishing the wicked to their satisfaction? It’s a good thing for them! Because if He gave everyone what they deserved, they wouldn’t exist—

- Malachi 3:6 ⁶“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

It’s only because God was merciful that He hadn’t wiped them out already!

*We need to learn a lesson here: sin always, always, has a blinding, deafening, and hardening effect on us – so that we gradually lose our ability to see our own sins. Oh, we still see sin in others! We can spot that speck a mile away – but we look right past our own log. We even become *more* self-righteous, amazing. That’s what had happened to these people: their own souls were in peril and they were asking God to mete out justice on the wicked!?

- Oh, be careful anytime you feel anger and impatience welling up inside for God to bring fire and brimstone on the wicked! “God, give those *other* people just what *they* deserve!” Be careful for your heart when you feel that way – that is sinful self-righteousness: if God did give everyone what they deserved, you would get hell. And so would I. We only escape by the mercy of God through Christ.

I remember as a baby Christian, me and my Jesus Freak friends were always chanting, “*Maranatha, come Lord Jesus!*” Truth is, we should *tremble* at the thought of Christ returning, because when He does, He will judge, and a whole lot of people that you and I care about will be sent away for punishment. Listen to what God said through the prophet Amos—

- Amos 5:18–20 ¹⁸Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, ¹⁹as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. ²⁰Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

When they questioned God’s justice, it revealed how hard their hearts were. They couldn’t see their own hypocrisy. So God answers them in v.1, but it wasn’t what they expected.

- It’s kinda like that scene in *A Few Good Men*, when Tom Cruise says to Jack Nicholson on the witness stand, “I want the truth!” And Jack Nicholson says, “*You can’t handle the truth!*”

God says to Israel: “You want justice? You want the day of the Lord? Let me tell you what that day will be like— “I will come alright!”

II. God’s surprising reply: “*I will come!*”

Notice that there are 3 persons mentioned here—

- Malachi 3:1 ¹“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

1.) The first Person is God: “Behold I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.” And at the end of this verse, God calls Himself “*the Lord of hosts*.”

2.) The second person is “my messenger,” which is John the Baptist. How do we know? Because Jesus quoted this very passage from Malachi in Matt.11:10 and said “It’s John!” John would be Jesus’ forerunner, to prepare His way. But John is also compared to Elijah to come in the next chapter—

- Malachi 4:5–6 ⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers . . .

This is talking about John the Baptist too. We know that because Zechariah quoted this very passage in speaking about his little baby boy – John—

- Luke 1:17 ¹⁷and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” I’ll come back to this.

3.) The third Person mentioned here is called “*the messenger of the covenant.*” This is a different messenger than John the Baptist. It has to be Jesus—

- Malachi 3:1 ¹“Behold, I (God) send my messenger (John), and he will prepare the way before *Me* [that’s God, but it’s also Jesus, because Jesus is God] And the Lord (Jesus) whom you seek will suddenly come to *His temple*; [Didn’t Jesus come to His temple as a little baby; when He was 12, dialoging with the religious leaders; and later when He came in and overturned the tables of the moneychangers – He actually did that twice.] and the messenger of the covenant (Messiah-Jesus, the Messenger of the New Covenant) in whom you delight, behold, *He is coming*, says the LORD of hosts.

He is coming! And let me point that God is speaking sarcastically when He says, “*the Lord whom you will seek,*” and “*the messenger of the covenant in who you delight.*” They didn’t delight in God and they wouldn’t delight in His Son. They would crucify Him. Malachi is setting us up for what we will see in the Gospels over and over: the Jews wanted their own kind of Messiah – one who would punish their enemies but give them a pass on their sins. Oh, they wanted judgment – but only for the *other* guy.

God is going to answer their cries for justice: Judgment is coming, in a Person: Jesus the Messiah, who is Lord, and God. Just what they wanted? Not exactly, because they would be on the receiving end of the justice they cried out for—

- Malachi 3:2 ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.

Who can endure that day? What’s the answer? No one. We sang from this Psalm earlier—

- Psalm 130:3–4 ³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

No one. Not one of us can withstand the judgment of God, because none of us are without sin. And God will punish sin, *all* sin, *every* sin; sins of deed and sins of the heart; sin of commission and sins of omission. He is a holy God and He *must* punish every sin to be true to Himself. He can do no other—

- Exodus 34:7 He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.
- Romans 6:23 ²³For the wages of sin is death.

For every person listening this morning, this is the sentence of judgment. But I hope you know the rest of this verse—

- Romans 6:23 ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus came to pay the wages of the sins of His own people by His death. He came to take on the condemnation of His people. The wages have been paid, and this is why the gift of eternal life is free for anyone who will trust in Jesus Christ. Again—

- Psalm 130:3–4 ³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴But with you *there is forgiveness*, that you may be feared.

In Christ, but only in Christ. So back to Malachi, God's answer to their cries for justice was that Messiah Jesus would come and He would bring judgment. Then God says something that sounds strange to us in vv.3-4—

- Malachi 3:3–4 ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

There are two ways to interpret this—

Some take this literally: It's talking about Jesus' Second Coming. He will bring back the Levitical priesthood, and Jesus will save physical Jews, from the lineage of Levi – I guess they will do '23 & Me' to figure that out. And these Jewish priests in this revived priesthood will offer literal animal sacrifices in a literal temple during a 1,000 year millennial kingdom.

What's wrong with this view? Answer: the whole Book of Hebrews! Beloved, redemptive history will never go backwards and return to Judaism, and sacrifices. That was all fulfilled and finished in Jesus. He is the final Priest, and the final sacrifice.

Plus the fact that v.1 has already told us that John the Baptist will come as the Messiah's forerunner – right? That's Jesus' *first coming*, not His *second* coming. But if you've been reading ahead, you might be wondering about what Malachi says in the next chapter—

- Malachi 4:5–6 ⁵"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

And I told you that in Lk.1:17, Zechariah said that his son, John the Baptist would be the fulfillment of this prophecy = John would fulfill the role of Elijah – and Jesus said so too! But this verse sure sounds like Jesus' Second Coming, when He comes to judge. And if you are confused, you are in great company: John the Baptist was just as confused by these same passages! But, I won't untangle all of this until we get to chapter 4 in a couple weeks. (I say that when I need more time to figure it out myself!)

But stay with me here: vv.3,4 describe what Jesus did at His *first coming*, and v.5 describes what Jesus will do at His *second coming*. So let's look at it—

III. He will purge His people – 1st coming of Christ (vv.3-4).

- Malachi 3:3–4 ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi (the priestly tribe) and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

So if this is talking about Jesus' first coming, instead of His second coming—

A. Who are the sons of Levi?

Answer: the church! Listen: Jesus' first coming was for the purpose of dying to redeem His people, right? But Malachi makes it sound like when the Messenger of the Covenant would come, sin would be judged. Now listen: sin *was* judged – on the cross – for God's people! That was Judgment Day for God's people!

So Jesus' work of regeneration and sanctification in His people is the fulfillment of Malachi's promise that the Lord will come and "*purify the sons of Levi*," and Levi was the priestly tribe, right? So New Covenant believers are the spiritual "*sons of Levi*." Let me remind you of some passages we looked at just a couple weeks ago, that describe Christians—

- 1 Peter 2:5 ⁵you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a *holy priesthood*, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.
- 1 Peter 2:9 ⁹But you are a chosen race, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
- Revelation 1:6 says that Jesus Christ has made us "priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

But this was even anticipated in the OT—

- Isaiah 61:6 ⁶but you shall be called the priests of the LORD; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God. . .
- Isaiah 66:21 God promises to bring in His elect from among the Gentiles nations, and then He says: ²¹And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD.

Beloved, the purified sons of Levi are not some future priesthood, but a present one, the church of Jesus Christ, redeemed by His blood, and sanctified by His Holy Spirit. This is what v.3 is talking about.

B. How are they cleansed?

1Jn.1:7 – "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

He burned it away and scrubbed it out through His death in our place – once and for all. But this passage is also talking about Jesus' ongoing work of refining and purifying His people—

- 1 Peter 1:6–7 ⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Our Jesus is the Refiner's fire we sang about! He will never be content with sin in His people. He will not be passive when He sees you in sin. You might be passive, Jesus won't be, because sin comes between Him and His people. You say, "But didn't He deal with all our sins at the cross?" Yes, BUT, there is still what the Puritans called "remaining sin" in you: sins that Jesus died for, and will never be punished, but they affect your fellowship with Him, they dull your witness for Him, and they flat out make life miserable – can I get an amen?

So He sits as a Refiner's fire to purify the sons of Levi, through His loving discipline, through tests and trials; He uses difficult people, difficult circumstances, He exposes your sins, your weakness, your fears, and your doubts, and He does all of it, out of pure love for you – do you believe that? If you do, then don't get mad at God when He does it! This is His sanctifying work in the lives of His children. We sing song after song praising Jesus for His saving work for us on the cross. How much do we praise and thank Him for His sanctifying work in our lives?

Beloved, Jesus loves you too much to leave you alone.

- *One day we are going to look back at 2020 as one of the craziest years in human history – but will we also look back and say, "God was doing a great work in me – a great work in our church! He was purging and purifying." Or will we look back and just remember complaining, whining – hoping it would all just go away?"

****I'll tell you, one of the most precious spiritual lessons you could ever learn is to recognize every trial God brings into your life – as it is happening! – as His refining work in your life, for your good, and His glory—and then commit yourself to cooperate with His purposes—***

- James 1:2–3 ²Count it all joy, my brothers, when (when it is happening, not in hindsight, later!) *when* you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.
- Spurgeon said this: "When God puts His own people into the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. He knows how long and how much . . . the Refiner is never far from the mouth of the furnace when His gold is in the fire, and the Son of God is always walking in the midst of the flames when His holy children are cast into them."

Beloved, for His people, Jesus is a *Refiner's Fire*, not an incinerator for destruction. And that makes all the difference. No matter how hot the fire seems to be, it's always and only meant to purify you, not destroy you: *"The flame shall not hurt you, I only design, your dross to consume and your gold to refine!"*

- 2 Corinthians 4:17 ¹⁷For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

But it's not optional. There is no painless path to heaven. Jesus sanctifies every person He saves, and it's no more possible to become pure painlessly, than it is to be burned painlessly.

The question is, "Are you cooperating with the process? God expects you to cooperate. Sanctification isn't something you just let happen to you – like you take a nap and wake up more sanctified!—

- Matthew 5:29–30 ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if

your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

- 1 Corinthians 9:27 I beat my body (give myself a black eye!) and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.
- Romans 8:13 ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

It's painful to cooperate with God when He puts you through the fire. It involves amputation, punching yourself and death! But what you gain is a clear conscience and intimacy with God. And this what Jesus is ultimately after in His refined people—

- Malachi 3:4 ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

True, acceptable worship! He didn't get it from His priests or His people, but Jesus will *redeem* and *refine* a people for His praise—

- Malachi 1:11 ¹¹For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.

Never forget that the ultimate reason Jesus redeemed you, and is now refining you, is to make you a *worshiper!*

And in v.5, God finally answers their sarcastic question: "Where is justice God? When are you going to judge all the bad people?" It's coming: not at Jesus' first coming, but it will come at His Second coming—

IV. He will punish His enemies – 2nd coming of Christ (v.5).

- Malachi 3:5 ⁵*Then*— I will draw near to you for judgment.

Let me explain this: Often times in the OT, prophets they only saw one coming of the Messiah. We know that Messiah would come twice: Jesus' first coming was to deal with the sins of His own people – Jesus' Second Coming will deal with the sins of everyone else, and they will be judged for their own sins. But when the prophets looked into the future it was like they saw these two events like two mountain peaks, close together – and they couldn't see that large span of time between them. Even John the Baptist thought that Jesus was going to bring in judgment and sweep in His Kingdom, at His first coming.

So there is a 2,000+ year gap between vv.1-4 and v.5. But when He comes the second time, *then* He will come in judgment on unbelievers—

- I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers [that's all those involved in occult and false religion], against the adulterers [sexual sin will be punished], against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages [bosses who rip off their employees], the widow and the fatherless [orphans], against those who thrust aside the sojourner [isn't that interesting? Those who would mistreat foreigners – throughout the OT God warned His people strongly about mistreating "aliens," "strangers." Even an illegal alien is an image-bearer, and your

neighbor, whom you are to love as yourself! And then God sums up all of these sins:] *and they do not fear me*, says the LORD of hosts.

And on that day, no one will be asking, “Where is justice?”—

- Nahum 1:6,8 ⁶Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him. . . ⁸But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness.

This is the answer to that age-old “problem of evil.” Unbelievers use it as an excuse for not submitting to God: “If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then why doesn’t He do something about evil?” Here’s the answer: One day, He will! He will punish all evil-doers, including all who rejected His Son, and He will create a new heaven and earth in which righteousness dwells.

So what is He waiting for?

. . . but mercy is still possible (v.6).

- Malachi 3:6 ⁶“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

He’s saying, “It’s only due to My unchanging mercy that you are not consumed right now.” Doesn’t that sound just like what Peter said to those who would question why God forestalls His judgment?—

- 2 Peter 3:9 ⁹The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

He’s giving unbelievers time to repent. And He’s giving His people time to get the Gospel out. Amen?

There is so much mercy in this passage. So much Gospel!—

God is more pure and holy than we can comprehend. And He will allow no alloys in His heaven. Heb. 12.14 speaks of *“holiness without which no one will see heaven.”* But we can’t purify ourselves. So God put His Son through the fires of His judgment for *our* purification. He went through the fire, but *we* were refined!

If He was only an incinerating fire, heaven would be empty. But He is a refining fire, so there will be a vast multitude in heaven, which no man can number. Will you part of that multitude? Jesus invites you to come to Him and have all your sins forgiven. Will you do that?

*Everyone who hears this message will either be one of those priests refined by His fire at His first coming, or one of those punished by His fire at His Second Coming. You either receive Him in this life as your Savior, or you will face Him in the next life as your Judge.

- Picture yourself bound and gagged and tied to a railroad track. You can hear and see a huge, thundering train coming towards you, getting larger and louder, ready to crush you. But right before it reaches you, it switches tracks. And tied to the other track is Jesus. For all those who believe, the Cross de-railed God’s wrath — and sent the full force of that wrath to crush His own Son.